Breathe in, breathe out

By Hyon O’Brien

Our daughters gave me an Apple watch last Christmas; I am still learning how to use it. Every day from time to time, this watch vibrates and tells me to stand and breathe. I used to ignore its instructions but now I tend to obey. I recognize the importance of standing and breathing intellectually but I am somewhat self-conscious doing it if I am with others. When my husband and I watch Korean dramas to keep up our modern Korean vocabulary (currently we are enjoying "Second to Last Love"), I don’t hesitate to stand and breathe. He knows I am trying to comply with my watch’s orders.

Speaking of breathing, have you ever heard of the Lamaze method? A French doctor, Fernando Lamaze (1891-1957), visited the Soviet Union in 1951 where he observed a birth preparation method in which mothers delivering babies were educated about pain management during childbirth by controlling their breathing. Lamaze introduced this method to the West.

I am grateful beneficiary of this wonderful method. In 1973 and 1976, for our two daughters’ births, my husband and I attended classes to learn the proper way to breathe during contractions. I managed to deliver both babies with less pain (and without screaming). I give much credit to my husband for his steadfast encouragement, coaching and patient guidance to monitor the breathing process for me. This was a great learning experience for both of us. I still use the breathing method I learned more than 40 years ago whenever I am in pain. I don’t tense up my muscles and fight against pain. I try to relax my body and breathe. That seems to decrease the intensity of the pain level.

A recent article in The New York Times by Matt Richtel reported on "mindfulness" training in the U.S. military and other armed forces. Mindfulness is the practice of using breathing techniques similar to those in meditation to gain focus and reduce distraction. According to Richtel’s report, U.S. soldiers in Hawaii will receive such training later this year (in Hawaii, a good place for it). The British Royal Navy and the New Zealand Defence Force have given mindfulness training to officers, and the Netherlands military are considering the idea too. NATO held a two-day symposium (April 9 and 10) in Berlin to discuss the evidence behind the use of mindfulness in the military. Some military officials begin to advocate the application of this mindfulness to trauma stressed veterans,
Miami. Dr. Jha and her colleagues reported their findings in the journal "Progress in Brain Research." Troops who went through a month-long training regimen that included daily practice in mindful breathing and focus techniques were better able to discern key information under chaotic circumstances, and experienced increases in working memory function. The soldiers reported making fewer errors than those who did not receive the training. Dr Jha has spoken to the U.S. Army War College and the British Parliament, and has been a consultant to New Zealand's Defence Force. NATO has held a two-day symposium to discuss the evidence behind the use of mindfulness in the military. Some military officials advocate the application of this mindfulness training to trauma-stressed veterans as well.

A writer in the Quaker tradition, Richard Foster, talks about the importance of being quiet for spiritual centeredness in "Solitude", a chapter in his 1978 book "Celebration of Discipline." We cannot achieve any spiritual growth in the midst of activities surrounded by crowds of people. It is a solitary work. Breathing mindfully while meditating on God's word seems to keep out the crowded and distracting thoughts that weigh us down and keep our minds wander away from divine teachings.

Psalm 46:10 urges us to "Be still and know that I am God." In this day and age of noises, activities, and things that pull us onto all directions, being quiet and alone in the presence of God demands disciplined focus. Even in the midst of crowded sports arena, airports and concert halls, I try to turn internally and breathe into my spiritual center. It has taken me many years of determined practice. I am indebted to Prof. Foster who illumined the way to walk closer to God. Who knew that mindful breathing and emptying out unwanted thoughts would lead to a state of perfect peace?

We also see the tradition of mindful breathing and meditation in Buddhism. Buddha's teaching included focused breathing during meditative contemplation. Buddha recognized that human life is riddled with much suffering (he identified 108 categories). The way to free oneself from that burdensome pain and agony is to let go of all desires and attachments. Then, the highest enlightenment can be reached, a state of nirvana emptied of suffering.

Let's learn from the wise prophets of bygone days: it's time to accept the importance of breathing. Let's experience the fruits of mindful meditation. Only in finding the wholeness of whom God intended us to be can we love fully and serve others.

Will you join me?

Take a deep breath…

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